

### *Rajita Pujare - NSF APNA Youth Ambassador*

When I decided to join the NSF APNA program, one of the most pressing things on my mind was definitely the benefits of such a program on my college application. However, I was also deeply interested in community service and developing closer ties to India and Indian culture. I can confidently say, after having gone through such an experience, that the knowledge and perspective I have gained from working with these children has changed me for the better and truly compelled me to reflect upon my own life, beyond the selfish trivialities. Having the opportunity to use my own talents and assets to better others around me rather than merely accumulating academic achievements and awards has undoubtedly changed my views on the importance of education and community service.

I arranged and conducted a three day workshop at St John's High School in Hyderabad. After introducing and pitching myself as well as discussing the logistics of the workshop with the principal of the school, we set to start the workshop the following week on a Tuesday. For about an hour and a half to two hours each day, I came to the school to meet a lively, ambitious, and intelligent group of children. Initially, I faced a setback regarding my communication; I apparently had an "American accent" that was hard to understand, and my anxiety and nerves did not help when I first tried to introduce myself and the workshop to the children. Despite this, the children were all incredibly accepting, welcoming, and supportive, and the principal and school teachers kindly "translated" what I was trying to say to the children. After that, I lost my nervousness and the workshop proceeded with no further complications.



With my brother as my aide, I began to teach the children fundamentals of spelling such as combining prefixes/suffixes, doubling consonants, parts of speech, forming plurals, etc. on the first day. The second day, we covered more difficult subjects, such as the etymologies/origins of various words, and how to incorporate that information into spelling or defining a word (as well as other spelling/vocabulary basics like syllables). The last day, we reviewed the difficult concepts, discussed oral spelling strategies and skills, and conducted a practice quiz. Finally, we commenced the official spelling bee at around midday. A written exam in which the children had to spell and determine the language of origin for a series of words was administered. Afterwards, we conducted an oral spelling bee with each class of children separately, for which each child was called up individually and was asked to spell the given word aloud. My mother, my brother, some school teachers and staff and I graded these tests and found the top placers in each class, as well as fill out the certificates for all of the students who attended the workshop. This was a long and exhausting process, but in the end we finally got to present the certificates and awards to each class of students. I felt a great sense of pride in both myself and the children, and I loved seeing the winning students receive their prize certificates and feel the reward of their hard work.



Though the children were quite intuitive and familiar with some of the concepts of the workshop, there were definitely things to work on. For instance, in the beginning of the workshop, many of them had no idea what syllables, prefixes and suffixes, or parts of speech were. However, their eagerness compensated immensely as we



progressed. Yelling “*Didi!*” and “*Bhaiya!*” while clamoring around my brother and I, they were desperate to be the first to have the correct answer and were keen on contributing to the discussion or conversation at hand. There were many humorous moments within the workshop that I remember fondly: for example, when teaching them about Spanish pronunciation and spelling, I used my own name (Rajita) as an example of the concept. I recalled to them how some Hispanic teachers of mine would accidentally pronounce my name like “fajita” with the silent “j” characteristic of Spanish, also helping them to reinforce the concept with the help of my anecdote. Before meeting the children, I had fearfully envisioned the cultural and linguistic barrier between us to be far more intrusive than it really was. I was wrong. There was a tangible connection between the children and my brother and I, though we came from quite different backgrounds. In between breaks, groups of children would come up to us and begin to cheerfully interrogate us, their expressions alternating between fascination and curiosity. “*What class are you in, Didi?*” “*They are from America!*” “*You have a Mac computer, Didi?*” Their intellect and outspokenness destroyed any barriers that might have existed between us. I found myself conversing with them easily and casually, more like a friend or a classmate rather than a teacher.

Overall, this experience was truly something I will never forget. Through helping the lives of others, I also gained a fair amount of wisdom myself by interacting with under privileged children who were perseverant and ambitious despite the circumstances. They were truly extraordinary students, and I will definitely miss them; I wish them the best in their future studies and endeavors, and hope their school will have a bright future as well. I would like to wholeheartedly thank the NSF/APNA organization, Mr. Venkat Gade, St John’s High School’s teachers and staff, Rebecca (the principal), and my mother, brother, & grandparents for making this incredible opportunity possible.

